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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [BE](#)  
SUBJECT: BELGIUM: NEW FOREIGN MINISTER YVES LETERME

Classified By: Acting Political Economic Counselor Robert Kiene, reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Former Prime Minister Yves Leterme was sworn in on July 16 as Belgium's new Foreign Minister, replacing Karel De Gucht who has moved to the European Commission as Commissioner for Development Assistance. Leterme served as Prime Minister from March 20 to December 22, 2008. Controversy over his role and that of his staff in handling the failed nationalization of the financial-services company Fortis forced Leterme to resign. Before serving as PM, he was the Minister-President of the Flemish Government and Flemish Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries. He has served as a federal senator since resigning as PM.

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POLITICAL HISTORY AND EXPERIENCE  
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¶2. (U) Before entering national politics, Leterme served as an auditor at the Belgian Court of Audit. His first political roles were Deputy National Secretary and later Secretary of the Christian People's Party (CVP), now known as the Christian Democratic Party (CD&V); he then resigned to become an EU civil servant. He has been a member of the city council of his hometown, Ieper, since 1995 and served as one of its Deputy Mayors from 1995 to 2001. Leterme was elected to the Belgian House of Representatives in 1997, 1999, and ¶2003. After the defeat of the CD&V in the general elections of 2003, Leterme succeeded Stefaan De Clerck as CD&V party chairman. He resigned in 2004 to accept the role of Minister-President of the Flemish government. Heading the CD&V - N-VA ticket in the 2007 federal elections, Leterme received almost 800,000 personal preference votes, a sign of his great popularity in Flanders. In the campaign leading up to the elections, Leterme promised he would stage a sweeping institutional reform devolving additional competencies to the Flemish regional government if elected. This pledge to Flanders and a number of unfortunate remarks regarding the Francophone community and Belgian national symbols made him extremely unpopular in the Francophone part of Belgium. Leterme failed to make any headway in institutional negotiations. Despite this setback, he managed to form a five-party coalition government of Christian-Democrats, Liberals, and Francophone Socialists in March 2008. As linguistic tension persisted, Leterme tendered his resignation in July 2008. The King refused the resignation and appointed mediators to find a solution to the institutional question, but this attempt to address institutional issues failed as well. The disappointed NV-A broke its alliance with CD&V and joined the opposition. The King asked Leterme to remain as PM. Ultimately, in the fall of 2008, members of Leterme's government were accused of attempting to influence a judge's decision in a case brought by shareholders of Fortis Bank, attempting to block the government's planned distress sale of the bank to BNP

Paribas. On December 22, 2008, Leterme and his entire cabinet tendered their resignations. Leterme then took up a seat in the Senate. Despite suspicions of his involvement, Leterme was cleared of any wrongdoing by a parliamentary commission looking into the affair.

-----sing a forrience as PM; Leterme attended both EU and NQTO Summits, and made trips to important BelgiQn foreign policy priority nations such as Afghanistan and the DRC. This experience will elp during Belgium's EU Presidency in the latte half of 2010. At the same time, a very senir and influential diplomat, Franciskus Van Da%le, formerly Belgium's permanent representative to NATO, has been appointed Leterme's chief of staff. Many expect Van Daele to play an iQportant role in formulating Belgium's foreign policy as he leads the less diplomatically experienced Leterme's cabinet. In any event, post considers Leterme a good partner for the United States, and we expect him to continue many of his predecessor's policies.

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